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Category: Aetiology

Study type: Cohort study

Author's declarative title: Positive parenting in adolescence is associated with well-(adaptive-) functioning adult offspring.

Citation: Johnson JG, Liu L, Cohen P. Parenting behaviours associated with the development of adaptive and maladaptive offspring personality traits. *Can J Psychiatry*. 2011 Aug;56(8):447-56.

Commentary (662 words from 'context')

Context

Parenting behaviours clearly impact children but how they impact adult behavior has received less attention. Johnson and colleagues aimed to determine the association between parenting behaviours and the coping skills, interpersonal skills, and personality traits of children that persist into adulthood. They examined this issue by conducting longitudinal research with mothers and children. Prior meta-analyses show positive parenting programmes work for improving children's behaviours.¹ This study provides additional evidence of a long-term effect.

Methods

Mothers and offspring of the 669 families who participated reported on positive parenting (e.g., affection, praise, communication) and child behaviours when the offspring were around 16 years of age. At follow-up, adaptive functioning (e.g., optimism, insight/warmth, productivity, and being assertive or expressing oneself skillfully) and personality disorder symptoms were measured. Mothers reported on their own and the father's psychiatric symptoms. Mothers and offspring reported on the father's parenting. While 10 out of 13 maternal-assessed variables showed internal consistency over 0.70, only 4 out of 13 paternal-assessed variables were over 0.70. Therefore, the paternal measures may be statistically limited in the number of possible significant findings.

Findings

Eight of the 12 positive parenting indices were associated with scoring in the top 33% range of adaptive functioning at ages 22 or 33. All 12 maternal behaviours were significantly associated with high functioning. The behaviours that seemed to discriminate most between the high and low functioning individuals were a positive attitude toward the child (adjusted odds ratio aOR 3.76, 95% CI 2.37-5.95), maternal communication (aOR 3.70, 95% CI 2.43-5.64), and attention/dedication to the child (aOR 3.00, 95% CI 1.93-4.65), as well as a paternal positive attitude toward the child (aOR 5.09, 95% CI 3.06-8.48), speaking kindly to the child (aOR 4.42, 95% CI 2.75-7.10), praise and encouragement (aOR 3.55, 95% CI 2.40-5.25), and good communication (aOR 3.09, 95% CI 1.99-4.79). Eight of the 12 maternal behaviours were associated with a lower risk of more than 11 personality disorder symptoms at mean ages of 22 and 33 years. The most discriminating maternal behaviours were being calm (aOR 0.31, 95% CI 0.20-0.51), speaking kindly to the child (aOR 0.39, 95% CI 0.25-0.62), and having a positive attitude toward the child (aOR 0.42, 95% CI 0.27-

0.66). For paternal behaviours, a good role model (aOR 0.32, 95% CI 0.20-0.50) and speaking kindly toward the child (aOR 0.36, 95% CI 0.23-0.57) were most discriminating.

Commentary

The findings that positive parenting behaviours allow children to be open and warm are consistent with prior research.² In this study, the use of multiple informants and the measurement of adult outcomes extends prior research. However, the authors acknowledge that the absence of paternal reports was a limitation of the study and could have limited the validity of the paternal report findings. Of importance, the findings indicate that positive parenting behaviours have a long-term effect that lasts into adulthood.

The impact of parenting on child wellbeing may be more complicated than a cause and effect model. Parenting may be related to offspring outcomes because of shared heritability between parents and offspring. In this study, Johnson and colleagues controlled for the parents' psychiatric symptoms in an effort to measure and adjust for this effect. Alternatively, parents may adopt parenting behaviours in reaction to the child's temperament or behaviour; this possibility was not addressed by the authors. Indeed, bidirectional effects have been shown to exist.³

In support of the importance of bidirectionality, the parenting behaviours that were most associated with adaptive outcomes seemed to be dependent on a reciprocal exchange between parents and children, instead of being purely parent-driven behaviours. For adaptive functioning and personality disorder symptoms, parents' communication, kind behaviour, and positive attitude toward the child may be highly reliant on the interaction with offspring of a specific temperament. Moreover, by the time children are 16, patterns of interaction between child and parent may be well entrenched. Recent research that follows youths who lack empathy and warmth for other people shows that their parents reported gaining little enjoyment from interacting with these youths as infants.⁴ Child behaviours may directly impact parenting behaviours and indirectly, through the effects on parents' parenting choices, relate to offspring adaptive functioning. This possibility dovetails with research that shows parenting interventions improve child behaviour problems as well as parental well-being.¹ The findings by Johnson and colleagues suggest if parents can adopt a positive attitude toward their adolescents, these adolescents become well-functioning adults.

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Conflicting interests

None